



Digging the Age of Aquarius

Author(s): Matthew Brunwasser

Source: *Archaeology*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (July/August 2009), pp. 30-33

Published by: Archaeological Institute of America

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41781310>

Accessed: 07-05-2017 14:36 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Archaeological Institute of America is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Archaeology*

MELTED SNEAKERS, SCORCHED FABRIC, broken plates, a tube of 40-year-old face cream, red plastic Monopoly hotels, and other chunks of debris fill cardboard cartons on a conference table at the Olompali State Historic Park Visitors Center in northern California. Some might call these artifacts—the remains of a hippie commune that called the park its home between 1967 and 1969—junk. But California state archaeologist E. Breck Parkman disagrees. Believing that his job managing the state’s historical resources gives him a responsibility not only to interpret the past, but also to plan for the future, Parkman is working to make sure that these seemingly mundane items aren’t just thrown away. He’s convinced that sorting, identifying, and storing some of these artifacts will enable future generations of archaeologists to create their own interpretations of the years between the Summer of Love and Woodstock—a period of political turbulence, generational conflict, and cultural experimentation that shaped modern America.

On a rainy day in February, I listen as Parkman explains his vision of how to preserve the history of the commune that existed here before a fire destroyed its rented home, a 22-room,

Digging the Age of Aquarius

Why trash from a hippie commune is worth preserving

by MATTHEW BRUNWASSER

19th-century house called the Burdell Mansion, about 30 miles north of San Francisco. In the face of resistance to using the funds of a state with a \$42-billion budget deficit to go through “hippie trash,” Parkman has enlisted several museum curators and two former commune residents to help him figure out what to keep and what to throw away. “Are we honoring the hippie period [by keeping these artifacts]?” asks 56-year-old Parkman with the slight southern accent he brought with him from his native Georgia. “No. We are saying that it’s significant. What’s important is that we want to curate the artifacts so that 50, 100, or 200 years in the future, people will be able to pull them out and do scientific study.”

IN DECEMBER 1967, BAY AREA real-estate developer Don McCoy, along with his wife and several close friends and their families, rented the Burdell Mansion and the accompanying 680-acre horse ranch from the University of San Francisco. A few years before he died in 2004, McCoy told the *San Francisco Examiner* that he was looking to duck all responsibility when he founded the Olompali commune, which residents called “The Ranch.” “I also was on a search for meaning in life. I was looking for answers,” he said. “It seemed like the world was going headlong to its own destruction. It seemed like man was raping the earth.” Soon he would preside over 60 full-time residents who spent some of their days baking bread in coffee cans and giving it away at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park.

While living at The Ranch, commune resident Noelle Burton told a Social Security administrator that her name was “Noelle Olompali”—for no particular reason she can recall. She’s not entirely sure what her legal name is now. (“Olompali” can be translated from the Miwok Indian language as “southern people” or “southern village” and refers to both the nation of coastal Miwoks living in the area and the area itself.) Looking at the 40-year-old remains of her life, Noelle Olompali-Burton, as she currently calls herself, now 58, recalls



Archaeologist Victor Bjelajac mulls over the remains of the hippie commune that thrived in Olompali State Historic Park between 1967 and 1969.

that the commune's parties drew hundreds of guests, which often included rock bands from San Francisco such as the Grateful Dead, the Quicksilver Messenger Service, and the New Riders of the Purple Sage. She tells me that these events lasted from Friday until Monday, and that it was often unclear when they started and stopped. The Ranch was also a hangout for leading counterculture figures such as Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, and Allen Ginsburg. "I came when I was 16 years old, living the teenager's dream of having no rules laid on you," she remembers.

As one of the commune's few teens, Olompali-Burton grew up sandwiched between younger children and adults—20-somethings who had never been anything but hippies and older residents who had dropped out of society after once being something else. Olompali-Burton recalls these as the happiest years of her life, when in addition to the parties and good times, she savored the utopian order residents had worked to build. She lived among hippie celebrities, danced onstage with the Grateful Dead, and ran light shows for concerts at the Avalon Ballroom and Longshoreman's Hall, legendary San Francisco concert venues. For a time she attended the commune's "Not School" where a former elementary school principal Garnet Brennan—who had been fired after admitting she smoked marijuana for 18 years—taught classes

using the "Summerhill Method" based on self-regulation and discipline through interaction with peers. Children also chose their own classes and although the school did have to meet some state standards, including mandatory physical education, attendance was not strictly enforced.

Then Olompali-Burton shows me an album she brought with her, filled with Polaroids with handwritten names and dates. In her favorite picture of herself, she is 18 years old, in a field, smiling and holding a bunch of white calla lilies. In another photo, a group of children wear brightly colored floral print clothing made from a bedspread someone brought back from India. She points to a hippie in another picture, a photographer from the *Pacific Sun* newspaper, who came to take pictures of the commune and never left.

Unlike the hundreds of other do-it-yourself communes sprouting up at the time throughout California, The Ranch was never short of cash. McCoy bankrolled the entire project with his personal wealth, amassed from developing the first houseboat marina in Sausalito, combined with an



California state archaeologist E. Breck Parkman surveys the damage caused by a 1969 electrical fire that destroyed the commune's main residence. He has made protecting what is left of the mansion one of his project's goals.

THE PROJECT TO PROTECT the Burdell Mansion—named after Galen Burdell, its first resident—and tell the commune's story has a long, strange history of its own. Since an electrical fire destroyed the house in February 1969—an event that marked the beginning of the end of the commune, which came six months later—the exposed remains of the mansion had slowly been disintegrating. In 1977, the State of California bought the land, including the mansion, from the university and created Olompali State Historic Park.

When Parkman joined the National Park Service in 1981, his first assignment was to survey the mansion's remains. He remembers walking through the house and looking at a charred refuse pile on the ground floor, where one item—a melted copy of a Beatles record (he thinks it was the *White Album*)—immediately caught his attention. At a hearing on the general plan for the park later that year, members of the public laughed at Parkman's inclusion of the hippie era as one of the important periods in the park's history. "People weren't ready for this at the time," Parkman tells me.

After moving on to other parks, he was called back to Olompali in 1997 when the Park Service decided to clean up the mostly collapsed mansion and try to secure and protect it. For 20 years, various temporary structures had been built over the remains, including a large tin-and-concrete shelter erected in 1993, which stands today. When he arrived, rubbish covered the mansion's bottom floor, where only some walls and a few window frames have remained in place. The upper floor was completely destroyed by the fire and subsequent decay. In October of 1997, right when his work was supposed to begin, Parkman discovered asbestos in the mansion's walls. Piles of charred building materials and artifacts were scooped up and sealed in two dozen 55-gallon drums. Finally, in January 2009, hazmat teams decontaminated and cleaned the drums' contents, making it possible for Parkman to start to sort the artifacts and begin his project in earnest.

The group now removes clothing, toiletries, shoes, electrical parts, melted record albums, scraps of reel-to-reel tapes, and glass shards from the file cartons and place them on a table covered with black plastic. Wearing surgical gloves to examine the objects, they seem fascinated in a way only possible when everyday items are out of their usual context and in a scholarly one that ascribes meaning to everything.

inheritance. "Don always said you could have whatever you needed, not whatever you wanted," recalls Olompali-Burton. For many residents, the point of the commune was to establish an alternative to the political and social darkness engulfing society. The war in Vietnam had led to unprecedented public protest and distrust of the government. At the same time, large segments of the population rallied to support the war, polarizing society as never before and leading to violence, race riots, and fears of spiraling instability. "[We wanted] to break away from that and get into our own space where we didn't have to worry about hiding our new lifestyle," said Buz Rowell, a gray-bearded 65-year-old who has filled out a bit since moving to the commune as a skinny young man just returned from Vietnam. Not quite trusting his memory 40 years later, Rowell says that the group was almost entirely vegetarian, "at least at the beginning." But Olompali-Burton

Former resident Noelle Olompali-Burton (top row, far right, in 1968) remembers her time on the commune as the happiest of her life.



quickly corrects him. "I recall cooking liver and onions in a huge skillet. And making sausages for breakfast, and meat-loaf." In fact, Parkman's team has found about 30 pieces of butchered cow and pig bones. "Someday, a scientist doing a study of diet in the 1960s might get happy seeing them," he says. "These are the kinds of things that we want to keep. They may have been in the garbage can, or could have been on the table the night of the fire, but where else do you have the last supper of a hippie commune?"

They discuss the artifacts' historical value and possible use in future museum displays, and decide which ones to keep and how to tag them for storage. "I doubt everything we have is important," Parkman tells his team, "because we threw out a big net and gathered everything so we could figure out what is and what isn't." Parkman had decided artifacts that are diagnostic—whose owner or place in the mansion or surrounding buildings can be identified—are more important than the things about which he doesn't have any clues. A shrivelled leather jacket—thought to have belonged to Olompali-Burton but turned out not to be hers (she remembers that hers had a different lining)—will be preserved anyway. The team believes that all clothing is important to keep. Bulkier stuff, such as electrical switches and chunks of wall plaster, will be tossed out since state storage facilities are reaching maximum capacity.

Meanwhile, Christina Swinden, a curator for museums in California state parks, is busy trying to figure out what furniture was brought by commune members, and what belonged to the mansion before they arrived. When she invites Rowell to help her, he recalls only a big dining room table being there when he moved in. Trying to reconstruct the history of a lamp whose pieces he had found, archaeologist and regional park maintenance supervisor Victor Bjelajac asks Rowell and Olompali-Burton if they remember it being in the house when they got there. "It's sort of gaudy and gold, with ceramic relief calligraphy," he adds to jog their memories.

Forty years after the commune disbanded, Noelle Olompali-Burton searches through its artifacts for objects she recognizes or that may have belonged to her.



It didn't ring any bells for either one. Bjelajac has more success with a battered five-pointed metal wind chime that he was able to match to a photo in Olompali-Burton's album.

After sorting for several hours, the group and I walk through the rain from the Visitors Center to the mansion. There is barely anything left of the building and only its shell remains, now protected by the far more substantial tin-and-concrete shelter. "We shot pool in here," says

Olompali-Burton, as we enter a large, empty room. "There were plastic benches," she says, pointing to the spot where commune residents used to eat. "It seems so tiny now."

Parkman shows me a large empty spot on the swept red tile floor. "When I came in 1981, the albums were right there," he says.



Some of the most famous bands of the 1960s played at the commune, including the Grateful Dead who used this photograph of themselves in Olompali on the back cover of their 1969 album AOXOMOXOA. The little girl in the front row is musician Courtney Love at age six.

AT THE END of the 1960s, the Olompali commune rose and fell along with the dramatic arc of high expectations and dashed hopes of the hippie era. Around Christmas of 1968, one of The Ranch's horses wandered onto nearby Highway 101, causing an accident that killed a truck driver. Olompali-Burton recalls that by early 1969, commune members were fighting among themselves. And the police—who wanted the commune out—raided the property twice during one week in January looking for drugs. Then the mansion burned down, forcing most residents to move to an adjacent dormitory building. Next, a commune member named Gino died in a motorcycle crash. In April, two children drowned in the mansion's pool. Finally, McCoy's in-laws had him committed to the Napa State Hospital for mental disorders, perhaps to prevent him from spending more of his inheritance on the commune. By August, all the residents had moved out.

Americans look back at the years between the summers of 1967 and 1969 either as a positive time of awakening social consciousness or a dark period of social division and anarchy. But whatever one's viewpoint, Parkman believes that the surviving material record of the commune can play a key role in understanding this short, intense, and significant historical moment and show that it is worth preserving. "In 100 years, we'll still have this collection, and I think there will be people who will be interested, even more so than there are today." ■

Matthew Brunwasser is a freelance writer based in San Francisco.